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*On Amartya Sen's concept of sympathy*

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# On Amartya Sen's concept of sympathy

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**Abstract:** This paper examines Amartya Sen's concept of sympathy and the oversimplified, ambiguous and sometimes erroneous interpretations of this concept by Sen's interpreters. In the first section, two types of sympathy can be found in Sen's 'Rational fools' essay – a contemplative and an active type of which the former has conceptual primacy. Following this, active sympathy is examined to ascertain what Sen means by 'actions based on sympathy' and why he deems these to be 'egoistic'. Sen's understanding of egoism means that sympathy is not straightforwardly assimilable to the orthodox theory of rational choice. The section after that analyses the place of altruism in Sen's work and ascertains that altruism can be aligned both with sympathy and commitment, depending on the definition one uses. The final section compares sympathy and commitment and establishes that they are to be distinguished, not according to the welfare a person expects to obtain from making choices, but according to the reason which motivates that person to make a choice.

**Keywords:** rational fools, Amartya Sen, sympathy, egoism, commitment, altruism

## Introduction

In his essay, 'Rational fools' (1977), Amartya Sen uses the concepts 'sympathy' and 'commitment' to capture aspects of human choice which are not straightforwardly conceivable in rational choice theory. Sympathy has been treated by Sen's interpreters as the weaker sibling of the pair, and Sen himself is partly responsible for the modest reputation which sympathy has. He has not, for instance, developed the concept of sympathy in his later *opus* in a manner similar to the reworking which commitment has undergone. And sympathy is less seditious *vis-à-vis* the orthodox theory of rational choice than commitment, something which makes the latter concept of more interest to Sen than sympathy.

The first section of this paper examines ambiguities in depictions of sympathy by Sen's interpreters. The questions these interpretations raise provide the basis for analysing sympathy in the sections thereafter. Following that, I distinguish two types of sympathy found in 'Rational fools', one *contemplative*, comprising a feeling, the other *active*, which motivates action. The third section focuses on active sympathy. It scrutinises Sen's concept of actions 'based on sympathy' and examines his claim that they are 'egoistic' (1977, p. 92) [1]. The egoism of actions based on sympathy, I argue, does not entail that an agent act with the goal of maximising her welfare. In the fourth section, I enquire into the place of altruism in Sen's conceptual schema and argue that Sen identifies two types of altruism, one – 'altruism through sympathy' – which, as the name suggests, aligns itself with sympathy and may be deemed egoistic; a second, more robust notion of altruism, freed from a motivational base in egoism, is also identified by Sen. This latter notion of altruism aligns itself with commitment and approaches the idea of 'psychological altruism' with which Sen's understanding of altruism is compared. The final section compares sympathy and commitment. There are *prima facie* grounds for holding that one and the same choice can be based both on commitment and on sympathy. This conclusion, I argue, disturbs Sen's conceptual separation of the two. The conclusion is, however, specious and can be avoided through an examination of what Sen means when he states that commitment involves counter-preferential choice.

## Sympathy: Sen's interpreters

Sen's interpreters make short shrift of sympathy and reserve most of their attention for commitment. This might be because sympathy is apparently the more straightforward of the two concepts, a view which Sen endorses (1977, p. 92). Indeed, Sen ultimately, in his work of the 2000s, concludes that sympathy can be incorporated into an extended version of orthodox rational choice theory which maintains the assumption that individuals pursue their self-interest in all their endeavours (Sen 2002, pp. 30-33). This would indeed make the concept of far less interest to critical and heterodox economists than commitment. But Sen's conclusion here belies elements of sympathy as he introduced it in 'Rational fools', and his commentators, as the following discussion shows, leave aspects of sympathy unmentioned or ambiguous. For this reason, sympathy deserves attention.

Fabienne Peter and Hans Bernhard Schmid discuss three types of motivation which Sen distinguishes. One is '(narrow) self-interest': 'One acts from self-interest when one aims at maximizing one's own welfare' (2007, p. 4). Sympathy, they write, is also a type of motivation: 'One acts from sympathy when one's own welfare is affected by how others are doing, as in the case where helping others makes one feel better' (2007, p. 4). The third motivation is commitment which, as Peter and Schmid write, is 'motivationally unrelated to the agent's welfare, however broadly conceived'. In this section, I contrast self-interest and sympathy and turn my attention to commitment in the final section of this paper.

Peter and Schmid's depiction of self-interest and sympathy is noteworthy for three reasons. First, that self-interest marks a type of motivation is clear from their mention of the *aim* behind an agent's self-interested action – to maximise her welfare. That sympathy is also a type of motivation may be gleaned from the case in which one's 'helping others makes one feel better'; here, too, action (helping others) comes to the fore. But is sympathy always a motivation for action? Peter and Schmid's description of sympathy as consisting in one's being 'affected by how others are doing' implies no necessary relation to action. Ann Cudd (2014, pp. 41-42), too, contends that sympathy 'involves one's feelings about the experiences of others'; again, no direct relation to action is implied. But Cudd also defines sympathy as an 'other-directed' *motivation*, and motivation, like Peter and Schmid's 'helping others', implies action. What is the relation between feelings of sympathy and the actions which they apparently motivate? We tackle this question in section which follows.

The second noteworthy feature of Peter and Schmid's depiction of sympathy is that, in contrast to their depiction of self-interest, they do not state the aim of an actor who acts from sympathy. They state that one 'aims at maximizing one's own welfare' when one acts from self-interest, but one is left to infer at what one aims when one acts from sympathy. Is the actor's goal (i) to make others better off, whereby the actor's feeling better is an unintended consequence of helping others, or (ii) to make herself feel better, whereby her attempt to make others better off is a means to this goal but not an end in itself? Both cases are compatible with the description that 'one's own welfare is affected by how others are doing', but they differ with respect to the aim or goal which the actor pursues. Daniel Hausman (2005, p. 40) writes that an action cannot be sympathetic in Sen's sense unless the actor expects to benefit from the action. This also leaves the goal open, for my expectation that I will benefit from acting sympathetically does not entail that obtaining this benefit be my goal; it could be an unintended consequence of pursuing a different goal. Philip Pettit

(2005) writes that sympathy 'materializes when one pursues one's own self-interest but that self-interest is positively sensitive to the welfare of others' (p. 17). The word 'pursues' suggests that what is being pursued – self-interest – constitutes the agent's aim or goal; it is what motivates her to act. This would make sympathy 'egoistic', which is how Sen (1977, p. 92) describes it. But is sympathy always egoistic? Pettit qualifies his statement when he discusses what Sen (1997, p. 760) calls 'altruism through sympathy', which, writes Pettit, 'is not self-interested in the sense of being pursued with an instrumental eye to securing some personal benefit ... [but] that the person we favor is someone whose welfare matters to us, intuitively, in the same manner as our own; let them fare well and we feel good' (2005, p. 17). Favouring somebody whose welfare is as important to us as our own does not sound egoistic. We examine the association between egoism and sympathy in the penultimate section of this paper when we take up the question of sympathy, egoism and altruism.

The third noteworthy point about Peter and Schmid's portrayal is that, whereas they associate self-interest with the *maximisation* of one's welfare, sympathy, in the form of helping others, makes one 'feel better'. Feeling better presumably includes cases in which my helping another person maximises my welfare, but feeling better might also involve increasing, but not maximising, my welfare. A question raised hereby concerns the relationship between sympathy and welfare maximisation.

In what follows, I undertake a close examination of Sen's pronouncements on sympathy, particularly those of 'Rational fools'. My argument issues in the following conclusions:

- (a) sympathy is not necessarily a type of motivation for action but can consist solely in a person's feelings in which case sympathy is contemplative;
- (b) Sen places an epistemological condition on contemplative sympathy which requires that a person, *A*, can only feel sympathy if she *knows* and does not merely believe that the welfare of another person, *B*, with whom *A* feels sympathy, has changed.
- (c) *pace* Sen, 'uncertainty' does not necessarily leave the formulation of sympathy unaffected;
- (d) contemplative sympathy is the primary but not sole type of sympathy, for there is another, *active*, type of sympathy which Sen clearly delineates;
- (e) Sen's understanding of egoism does not imply that the actor seeks to maximise her welfare when she performs actions based on sympathy;

- (f) actions based on sympathy are 'altruistic' only on a narrow (self-interested) understanding of that term; only commitment is compatible with a non-self-interested understanding of altruism which Sen identifies;
- (g) choice based on commitment is distinguished, not by the expected welfare effects it has for the agent who makes that choice, but by its reason-based (as opposed to preference-based) motivational structure.

## Two types of sympathy

Four passages from 'Rational fools', labelled P1, P2, P3 and P4 below, form the basis of my analysis of sympathy:

- P1: 'sympathy ... corresponds to the case in which concern for others directly affects one's welfare. If the knowledge of torture of others makes you sick, it is a case of sympathy.' (pp. 91-92)
- P2: 'It can be argued that behaviour based on sympathy is in an important sense egoistic, for one is oneself pleased at others' pleasure and pained by others' pain, and the pursuit of one's own utility may thus be helped by sympathetic action.' (p. 92)
- P3: 'When a person's sense of well-being is psychologically dependent on someone else's welfare, it is a case of sympathy; other things given, the awareness of the increase in the welfare of the other person then makes this person directly better off.' (p. 92)
- P4: 'I have not yet referred to uncertainty concerning anticipated welfare. When this is introduced, the concept of sympathy is unaffected, but commitment will require reformulation.' (p. 93)

Passage P3 directs our attention to *contemplative sympathy*. It states that *A*'s awareness of an increase in *B*'s welfare suffices to make *A* better off. The 'psychological dependence' of *A*'s welfare on *B*'s is independent of *A*'s actions – hence the contemplative nature of this type of sympathy. The increase in *B*'s welfare might arise through someone else's, *C*'s, agency, or result from an 'act of God'. Because *B*'s happiness is brought about independently of *A*'s actions, it makes no sense, when we analyse the sympathetic increase in *A*'s welfare, to speak of *A*'s *motivation*, for *A*'s actions do not bring about the increase in *B*'s welfare, and where there is no action on the part of *A*, there is no motivation. *A* merely experiences a feeling caused by her awareness of the increase in *B*'s welfare. We have therefore

established conclusion (a) from the previous section: sympathy is not necessarily a type of motivation but can be simply a feeling.

Although Sen (1977, p. 92) does not attribute 'great merit' to his choice of term 'sympathy' (or 'commitment'), contemplative sympathy is well attuned to quotidian understandings of sympathy as a 'state of being affected by the condition of another with a feeling similar or corresponding to that of the other' ('sympathy', *OED* Online, definition 3b). As we shall see in closing this section, Sen's understanding of contemplative sympathy also has similarities to Adam Smith's use of the term. Before we get that far, though, let us examine an epistemological criterion for sympathy which Sen introduces, and, second, enquire into the impact of uncertainty on the formulation of sympathy.

Passage P1 identifies a case of sympathy as one in which *A*'s *knowledge* of *B*'s welfare has an impact on *A*'s own welfare. The term 'knowledge' in P1 does the same work that 'awareness' does in P3. It might, however, be the case that *A*'s welfare rises as a result of her *belief* that *B*'s welfare has risen, and hence one might hold that *A*'s belief, rather than her knowledge, about *B*'s welfare suffices to induce feelings of sympathy in *A*. But this is not the case. To see why, consider a case in which *A* mistakenly believes that *B* is very happy, and this belief increases *A*'s happiness. This is not a case of sympathy *sensu stricto* because 'sympathy relates similar things to each other—namely, welfares of different persons' (Sen 1977, p. 92). Taking Sen at his word, an increase in *A*'s welfare which results from her mistaken belief that *B*'s welfare has risen cannot be a case of sympathy, for in such a case, 'similar things' – *A*'s and *B*'s welfare – are not related; the relation is between *A*'s welfare and *A*'s (false) belief about *B*'s welfare but not between *A*'s welfare and *B*'s actual welfare. If *ex hypothesi* *B*'s welfare remains unchanged but *A* erroneously believes that *B*'s welfare has risen, *A* might feel precisely as she would have *B*'s welfare actually increased and *A* knew that this was the case. But the mistaken nature of *A*'s belief excludes the increase in *A*'s welfare from being a sympathetic one, for Sen's 'similar things' clause would not be fulfilled by such a case. This clause thus poses an epistemological criterion for sympathy which *A*'s feeling, being based on a false belief, does not meet in the example just construed. This establishes the epistemological condition Sen imposes on contemplative sympathy stated in conclusion (b) from the previous section.

Let us now look at the influence of uncertainty which Sen introduces in P4. 'Uncertainty', for Sen, takes an expected-utility form, whereby possible outcomes,



$x_P, x_{\mathcal{P}}, \dots, x_H$ , are weighted by the agent's respective subjective probability estimate  $P_P, P_{\mathcal{P}}, \dots, P_H$  of those outcomes occurring. Strictly speaking, this probabilistic notation entails that Sen is referring to *risk* rather than uncertainty, at least if we follow Frank Knight's distinction between the two (Knight 1921). In the discussion which ensues, I will refer, to be faithful to Sen's terminology, to 'uncertainty', though the caveat regarding its appropriateness in this context should be borne in mind [2].

Sen's contention that uncertainty leaves the concept of sympathy unaffected clearly applies to contemplative sympathy, for in a case of contemplative sympathy, the state of affairs – the increase in  $B$ 's welfare – which increases  $A$ 's welfare sympathetically, is certain; it has been brought about (though not by  $A$ ), and consequently there is no uncertainty surrounding this outcome.  $A$  can therefore derive sympathetic welfare from beholding  $B$ 's enhanced welfare without having to assign a probability to the increase in  $B$ 's welfare coming about – the increase has already come to pass. Matters are different when we turn to a different, non-contemplative, kind of sympathy. In P2, Sen mentions 'sympathetic action'. This term refers to actions, performed by  $A$ , which bring about an increase in  $B$ 's welfare which, in turn, increases  $A$ 's welfare. Let us call this *active sympathy* to mark the fact that  $A$ 's action is the causal initiator of  $B$ 's enhanced welfare and of the subsequent sympathetic rise in  $A$ 's welfare. Consider the influence of uncertainty on active sympathy. When  $A$  considers performing an action which she expects to redound positively to  $B$ 's welfare,  $A$  is uncertain about the outcome of her action on  $B$ 's welfare. As a result of performing the action,  $A$  anticipates an increase of her own welfare equal to  $pW_A$ , where  $W_A$  is the increase in  $A$ 's welfare should her action bring about the increase in  $B$ 's welfare, and  $p$  is  $A$ 's subjective probability estimate that the anticipated effect of the action on  $B$ 's welfare actually does come about. Uncertainty, here, changes the formulation of active sympathy rather as it does, *mutatis mutandis*, the formulation of commitment (as Sen states in the same paragraph of 'Rational fools'). The foregoing establishes conclusion (c) from the previous section: uncertainty does not leave the formulation of active sympathy untouched because it places us into the realm of  $A$ 's 'expected personal welfare' (Sen 1977, p. 93). This contrasts with the formulation of contemplative sympathy which is unaffected by uncertainty.

Why, in light of the above, does Sen claim, in P4, that uncertainty impinges only on the formulation of commitment? When he tells us that uncertainty leaves sympathy untouched, he seems to make the claim with regard to sympathy *tout*

*court*, not just for certain types of sympathy. A possible explanation is that, for Sen, contemplative sympathy is the primary type, and when he writes of sympathy *sans phrase*, he means contemplative sympathy. Is there textual evidence that contemplative sympathy be the primary type?

There is, and it is to be found, *inter alia*, in the way Sen first introduces sympathy in 'Rational fools' in passage P1. P1 does not mention action but merely that the welfare of a sympathetic person is affected by a concern for and knowledge of others' welfare. This definition identifies contemplative, not active, sympathy. This is underscored in Sen's *official definition* of sympathy in the following passage. I call this definition 'official' because his subsequent expositions of sympathy quote this passage (1985, p. 214; 2002, p. 35; 2005, p. 7; 2009b, p. 188): 'Sympathy ... refers to one person's welfare being affected by the position of others (e.g., feeling depressed at the sight of misery)' (1982, pp. 7-8). This definition does not specify that the actions which bring about an increase in the welfare of person *B* must be performed by the same person, *A*, who derives sympathetic welfare from the increase in *B*'s welfare. Rather the definition holds sympathy to consist solely in a feeling brought about by awareness of another person's plight. This official definition therefore picks out sympathy in its contemplative form.

There is a further reason for prioritising contemplative over active sympathy: active sympathy presupposes its contemplative counterpart but not *vice versa*. Having performed an action, and beheld that the action has increased *B*'s welfare, *A*'s awareness of the increase in *B*'s welfare increases her own welfare sympathetically. The awareness part of this operation is contemplative. Hence, the full description of active sympathy has two parts: (i) an active part, whereby *A* acts in a way which increases *B*'s welfare, and (ii) a contemplative part, whereby *A* beholds the effect of her action on *B*'s welfare and experiences an increase in her own welfare as a result. The contemplative part can exist without the active part, i.e. when *A*'s welfare rises as a result of her awareness of an increase in *B*'s welfare of which *A*'s action is not the cause. *A*'s sympathy in such a case is purely contemplative. Questions of motivation have no place in contemplative sympathy because the latter is detached from action. It is otherwise with active sympathy which cannot exist without contemplative sympathy and involves questions of motivation. The foregoing discussion establishes conclusion (d) from the previous section: contemplative sympathy is the primary type of sympathy. And this explains Sen's claim that uncertainty has no impact on the formulation of sympathy, for, with this claim, he must be referring to contemplative sympathy.

By prioritising contemplative sympathy, Sen's approach echoes that of Adam Smith for whom sympathy is also primarily a feeling – an observer's 'fellow-feeling' with the passions which arise in, and are manifested by, an actor (Smith [1790] 1979, I.i.1.5). This fellow-feeling is not necessarily related to action on the part of the observer, beyond, that is, displays of approval or disapproval which the observer manifests according to the 'pitch' of the actor's passions (I.i.4.8, 9) [3]. Smith, like Sen, does advert to action which can be motivated by feelings of sympathy, though he does so rarely. For instance, Smith talks of spectators having not only 'sincerest sympathy' when calamity befalls us, but also giving us 'the kindest assistance' (I.ii.5.4); and he holds that we can sympathise with the resentment of an oppressed person to an extent which makes us 'ready to assist him whenever he exerts himself for defence' (II.i.2.4.1). Nevertheless, most of Smith's discussion abstracts from action, and what he writes about spectators' fellow-feeling stands independently of any action which such feeling may induce in the spectator. Like Sen, then, Smith also prioritises a contemplative sort of sympathy.

## Active sympathy

In passage P2, Sen introduces actions 'based on sympathy', a notion which appears often in his work (1987, p. 28; 2009a, p. 43). Only with this notion (and not with contemplative sympathy) are questions of motivation raised; and only in the context of motivation can we clarify what Sen means when he refers to sympathetic actions as 'egoistic' (P2). He writes in P2 that, by performing actions based on sympathy, a person is 'pleased at others' pleasure and pained by others' pain'. As it stands, this does not tell us whether a desire to feel pleasure or avoid pain motivates the person to act sympathetically. In P2, Sen also states that sympathetic action can 'help' the 'pursuit of one's own utility', and the word 'pursuit' implies something about one's aim, though pursuing one's own utility does not imply that utility is all one need pursue through sympathetic actions. Sen's clearest statement on the motivational aspect of actions based on sympathy comes in an unfortunately cryptic parenthetical remark which, for ease of analysis, I divide into four parts – [a], [b], [c] and [d]; the italics are Sen's:

(Note, however, that [a] the *existence* of sympathy [b] does not imply that the action helpful to others must be *based on* sympathy [c] in the sense that the action would not take place had one got less or no comfort from others' welfare. [d] This question of causation is to be taken up presently) (1977, p. 92).

The remark may be rewritten as follows:

[a] We have established the existence of active sympathy. [b] We should not be led, however, to hold that *every* action helpful to others is based on sympathy. [c] To clarify, a helpful action based on sympathy is one which the actor would not perform if she did not expect to derive welfare by performing it. [d] This raises questions of causation.

Let us clarify two terminological matters. First, by 'causation', Sen means motivation, i.e. the question: what motivates the agent to act or what is her goal? Second, action *based on sympathy* is a technical term in Sen's writing. I have reformulated its meaning in clause [c] above and investigate it further below.

Sen's parenthetic remark would have been clearer had Sen inserted the following sentence between [c] and [d]: *But there are other helpful actions which are not based on sympathy; these actions, unlike those based on sympathy, are not motivated by an expectation that the actor will derive welfare from performing them.* These other, non-sympathy-based, actions are based on commitment, though Sen does not label them thus in his parenthetic remark; they are distinguished from actions based on sympathy because a person who performs committed actions does so independently of her welfare expectations from performing them. Having implicitly referred to choices based on commitment in his parenthetic remark, Sen mentions the 'question of causation' in his parenthetic remark. He does not, however, discuss this question in relation to sympathy because actions based on sympathy are motivationally straightforward: they are performed only because the actor anticipates that they will confer welfare on her. The goal behind actions based on sympathy, then, is the derivation of welfare; this motivational aspect of actions based on sympathy makes them egoistic.

The foregoing does not, however, offer a full specification of what Sen means by egoism. Recall from the first section of this paper the ambiguity in Peter and Schmid's depiction of sympathetic actions making the actor feel better (2007, p. 4). Does the goal of deriving welfare ('feeling better') imply that the actor's goal is to maximise her welfare? Elizabeth Anderson thinks it does: sympathy, she writes, is a 'matter of maximizing utility in the narrow, egoistic sense' (2001, p. 22). There is reason to argue, however, that Sen does not associate egoism with welfare maximisation.

Evidence that Sen does not associate egoism with the goal of welfare maximisation is as follows:

- (i) Sen does not use the term 'maximisation' when he describes the effects of sympathy-based actions on the actor's welfare. Instead he uses informal terms, as in P2 – the 'pursuit of one's own utility may thus be *helped* by sympathetic action' (1977, p. 92 emphasis added).
- (ii) He writes that sympathy 'does not require any departure from individual-welfare maximization' (Sen 1982, p. 8 emphasis added). Requiring 'no departure' from maximisation means that sympathy may involve, but does not necessitate, welfare maximisation.
- (iii) Sen describes the effects of sympathetic action on its perpetrator in terms of having 'the net effect of making one feel ... better off' (1987, p. 28). Again, the term maximisation is absent, Sen preferring the informal *feeling better off*, of which Peter and Schmid avail themselves.
- (iv) More recently, Sen writes that 'it is their own welfare that they [actors] continue to pursue' when they perform sympathy-based actions (2009a, p. 43); once again, he adopts the idea of pursuing welfare, but he does not state that people pursue the maximisation of their welfare when they perform actions based on sympathy.

Sen, therefore, apparently conceives the egoism of actions based on sympathy in terms of the actor having the goal of *increasing* but not necessarily maximising her welfare. This understanding of egoism corresponds to a conception found in everyday parlance and philosophical discussions – of egoism *qua* acting in one's self-interest, with no mention of the technical concept of maximisation (Feinberg 1971, pp. 489-490). Sen's agnosticism about maximisation means that actions based on sympathy do not fit snugly into the orthodox theory of rational choice if welfare maximisation be a necessary feature of that theory. The foregoing establishes conclusion (e) which we enumerated in the first section above: Sen's understanding of egoism does not imply that the actor seeks to maximise her welfare when she performs actions based on sympathy.

We can now offer a formal definition of actions based on sympathy. Each of the following conditions is necessary, and they are, together, sufficient for classifying an action as based on sympathy:

- (1) the action increases the welfare of another person;
- (2) it confers welfare on the perpetrator of the action;
- (3) the prospect of attaining the welfare specified in 2) is what motivates the actor to perform the action, and without this prospect, the actor would not perform the action; deriving welfare is therefore the actor's *goal*.

Conditions (1) and (2) are consequential in nature – they relate to the welfare consequences of the action for the person to whom the action is directed and for the actor herself. Condition (3), by contrast, is motivational – it provides information about the actor's goal. An implication of 2) is that there exist two types of action based on sympathy. Both confer welfare on the actor, and in each case it is the actor's goal to derive this welfare; one type of action based on sympathy *maximises* whilst the other *increases* (but does not maximise) the welfare of the actor.

Actions based on sympathy are, as we have seen above, egoistic and this would seem to exclude them from being altruistic. Sen's discussion of altruism is more complex than the preceding statement suggests, and hence we turn now to address sympathy and its relationship to altruism.

## Sympathy and altruism

Sen's discussion of sympathy and commitment raises the question as to where the concept of altruism is to be located in relation to them, a question explored but briefly by some of his commentators (e.g. Anderson 2001, p. 22; Hausman 2005, pp. 57-8; 2012, pp. 58-9; Shiell and Rush 2003, pp. 649-50). The answer depends on how one defines altruism. Rather than stipulate a definition of altruism and see whether it matches sympathy or commitment more closely, the following discussion is orientated to what Sen writes about altruism. His discussions of altruism, though not effusive, give hints as to his understanding of the term, and they clarify Sen's position on sympathy and commitment, and on the relationship between the two.

There are *prima facie* grounds for classifying actions based on sympathy as altruistic for the reason that the actor who performs such actions does so in the expectation that she will thereby increase the welfare of another person. Indeed, Sen associates actions based on sympathy with altruism and coins the term 'altruism through sympathy' to denominate them. 'Altruism through sympathy' he holds, is equivalent to 'self-interested benevolence' (1997, p. 760 n. 33): it is 'benevolent' because it increases the welfare of another person, and 'self-interested' because the agent's goal, as with all actions based on sympathy, is to derive welfare to herself. But there's the rub, for many theorists of altruism insist that an altruistic act requires that the actor have the 'ultimate goal' of benefiting another person (Batson 2011, p. 21). Though Sen's altruism through sympathy might involve an agent performing actions with the immediate aim of increasing another person's welfare,

the actor's *ultimate* goal is to increase her own welfare; increasing the other person's welfare is a subordinate goal and a *means* to realising the actor's ultimate goal.

Actions based on sympathy, then, are only altruistic if one characterises altruistic acts according to a consequential feature – that they improve the welfare of another person – together with an egoistic motivation on the part of the actor. Sen is sceptical about such a view of altruism, for it involves the actor maximising a welfare function which 'incorporates his altruism toward others' (Sen 1997, p. 760). This sort of sympathetic altruism, whilst not self-centred (because it presupposes that a person can derive welfare from the increased welfare of others), is nevertheless self-*interested* because actors only 'take note of others' interests within their own utility' (Sen 2009b, p. 189; 2002, p. 31). Unless an actor, *A*, registers within her own welfare function an increase in the welfare of another person, *B*, whose welfare is increased by *A*'s actions, *A* would not be concerned about *B*'s welfare and would not, therefore, be motivated to perform an action which increases *B*'s welfare. This, Sen notes, is the approach of Gary Becker, for whom altruism through sympathy is brought into the theory of rational choice by 'accommodating within the concept of self-interest our many non-self-centred concerns' (Sen 2005, p. 19). Whilst this might suffice, in the view of some theorists, as a characterisation of altruism, Sen is not content to let the matter rest there.

Sen contrasts the above, self-interested, notion of altruism through sympathy with a non-self-interested type of altruism whereby 'the other person's well-being remains a *separate concern*' (Sen 1997, p. 760 emphasis added); here, *B*'s welfare is of significance to *A* in and of itself, that is, *beyond* rather than 'within' *A*'s own utility. Concern for others can therefore constitute a reason which motivates *A* to act in a way which promotes *B*'s welfare *whether or not so acting is registered positively in A's welfare function*. Sen approaches the ground marked out by the psychological view of altruism here because, if *B*'s welfare is of significance to *A* beyond the extent to which it influences *A*'s welfare, *A*'s interest in improving *B*'s welfare is not derived from *A*'s interest in raising her own welfare. However, this does not necessarily make *A*'s attempt to increase *B*'s welfare psychologically altruistic in the sense stated above, for *A*'s taking account of *B*'s welfare beyond *A*'s own utility need not entail that increasing *B*'s welfare be *A*'s *ultimate* (in the sense of final) goal; helping *B* might be *A*'s means of realizing a further goal, such as comporting herself in accord with the commandments of God. Sen therefore entertains a concept of altruism which makes acting altruistically more than self-interested benevolence because he conceives a type of altruism freed from a motivational base in self-

interest. Altruistic actions of this sort cannot be accommodated within the concept of sympathy because they do not fulfil condition (3) for actions based on sympathy given at the close of the previous section. Condition (3) states that the prospect of attaining welfare is what motivates an action. Altruistic actions freed from a motivational base in self-interest fall instead under the heading of commitment because the actor must have a welfare-independent reason for performing acts which improve the welfare of others. This is conclusion (f) from the first section of this paper.

## Sympathy and commitment

I have already strayed onto the terrain of commitment in the previous section, and this has prepared the way for a systematic analysis of the relationship between sympathy and commitment, the task of the present section.

Sen's first stab at a definition of commitment is 'in terms of a person choosing an act that he believes will yield a lower level of personal welfare to him than an alternative that is also available' (1977, p. 92). By including the word 'believes' in this definition, Sen excludes 'acts that go against self-interest resulting purely from a failure to foresee consequences' (1977, p. 92). The actor who chooses a committed action does so in anticipation that it will not maximise her welfare. The action must therefore be performed for a reason which does not consist in its maximising the actor's welfare. By insinuating the actor's reason, here, Sen's initial definition of commitment brings the question of causation to light. The question is further illuminated by a second, 'more inclusive', definition of commitment which addresses the possibility that a person's choice 'happens to coincide with the maximization of his anticipated personal welfare, but that is not the *reason* for his choice' (1977, p. 92). The more inclusive definition addresses a special class of welfare-maximising choices which are excluded from commitment by the initial definition. Such choices raise the following question: was the actor motivated to act by the prospect of maximising her welfare, or was the welfare-maximising nature of the act incidental to the actor's motivation? If the latter, the choice was committed. To determine whether a choice is based on commitment, Sen (1977, p. 92) poses the following counterfactual question: would the actor have made the same choice had she expected not to maximise her welfare? If the answer is 'yes', the choice made is based on commitment, for the actor's reason for choosing was not conditional on her belief that the action would maximise her welfare. According to Sen's more inclusive



definition of commitment, then, welfare-maximising choices can be committed, as long as welfare maximisation does not constitute the actor's goal.

The analyses of sympathy and commitment offered thus far lead to the conclusion that some choices which are based on commitment also fulfil the conditions for actions based on sympathy. After showing why this is the case immediately below, I will argue that this is a troubling conclusion for Sen, and then I will argue for an understanding of commitment which banishes this conclusion.

In the previous section, two types of actions based on sympathy were distinguished: welfare-increasing and welfare-maximising actions. Welfare-maximising actions based on sympathy cannot be committed, for the actor who performs such actions has the goal of maximising her welfare which makes it incompatible with all committed choices. Viewed purely consequentially, committed choices may maximise the actor's welfare, but the actor who makes a choice based on commitment is, by definition, not permitted to make the maximisation of her welfare her *goal*. This excludes any overlap between the set of actions based on commitment and the set of welfare-maximising actions based on sympathy. What about the second type of action based on sympathy – the welfare-increasing type. How do these relate to commitment?

A person who performs a welfare-increasing action based on sympathy has the goal of increasing but not maximising her welfare. This action therefore fulfils the condition for commitment given in Sen's initial definition: the actor believes that choosing to perform the action will not lead to the maximisation of her welfare. Thus, it seems that one and the same choice can be based on sympathy *and* commitment. This conclusion might strike the reader as surprising, for although Sen never rules out this possibility *expressis verbis*, he usually presents sympathy and commitment as contrasting categories. He states, for example, that action based on commitment is non-egoistic, whilst action based on sympathy is egoistic (1977, p. 92). Hence, the conclusion that a choice can be both sympathetic and committed introduces dissonance into Sen's conceptual framework. Can Sen's more inclusive definition of commitment remove this dissonance? It cannot, for the more inclusive definition only addresses choices which maximise the actor's welfare; it is silent on welfare-increasing choices. There is, nevertheless, a reason for excluding welfare-increasing choices based on sympathy from the set of choices based on commitment, and this reason concerns Sen's claim that choices based on commitment are *counter-preferential*.

Commitment involves counter-preferential choice because it 'destroy[s] the crucial assumption that a chosen alternative must be better than (or at least as good as) the others for the person choosing it' (Sen 1977, p. 93). How are we to understand the destruction of this crucial assumption which makes commitment counter-preferential? One way would be through a simple negation, whereby, in the passage just quoted, one would invert the term 'better than' and transform it into 'worse than'. This would yield the statement: *commitment involves the assumption that a chosen alternative must be worse than others for the person choosing it*. This way of destroying the crucial assumption is suggested by Sen's initial definition of commitment, which implies that, to perform a choice based on commitment, the agent must expect the option chosen to be worse than at least one other option available. This is not, however, how Sen understands the destruction of the crucial assumption, for only choices which fulfil the initial definition of commitment negate the crucial assumption in this way. Once we bring in Sen's more inclusive definition of commitment, we must allow for choices based on commitment which maximise the expected welfare of the chooser. Once we do so, we find that commitment leaves the relationship between committed choices and the agent's expectations regarding their welfare consequences indeterminate. An agent who makes a choice based on commitment may believe any of the following:

- (i) that her choice will maximise her welfare;
- (ii) that her choice will increase (but not maximise) her welfare;
- (iii) that her choice will leave her welfare unaltered;
- (iv) that her choice will decrease her welfare;
- (v) that her choice will minimise her welfare.

All such expected welfare consequences are compatible with choices based on commitment, whereby cases (ii) to (v) are covered by Sen's initial definition of commitment, and case (i) by his more inclusive definition.

When Sen writes that commitment destroys the connection between personal choice and personal welfare, then, he means that *nothing* about the actor's beliefs regarding the welfare consequences of making a choice are determined by the notion of commitment. The expected welfare consequences of making a choice based on commitment are entirely open. The foregoing alerts us to an important requirement when we characterize commitment: if making a choice based on commitment is compatible with any welfare consequence – (i) to (v) above – which the agent who makes the choice may anticipate, the counter-preferential nature of choices based on commitment cannot be conceived in terms of a particular configuration

of expected welfare consequences. What is decisive in defining choices based on commitment is something other than their expected welfare consequences. This 'something other' which makes commitment counter-preferential, is that choices based on commitment are reason-based rather than preference-based, and this is why Sen, in introducing his more inclusive definition of commitment, addresses the 'more difficult question ... when a person's choice happens to coincide with the maximization of his anticipated personal welfare, but that is not the *reason* for his choice' (1977, p. 92). Only if a person makes a choice for a reason which would motivate her to make that choice irrespective of the consequences she expects it to have for her welfare, is her choice based on commitment. This is conclusion (g) from the first section of this paper. What sort of reason must this be? Sen states that commitment is 'closely connected to our morals' (1977, p. 93), a term which he conceives broadly. He identifies a space 'between egoism and universalized moral systems' (1977, p. 106) in which the moral reasons which motivate choices based on commitment are located:

Groups intermediate between oneself and all, such as class and community, provide the focus for many actions involving commitment. The rejection of egoism as [a] description of motivation does not, therefore, imply the acceptance of some universalized morality as the basis of actual behaviour. Nor does it make human beings excessively noble (1977: 106; cf. 1982, p. 8).

Keeping this broad sense of morals in mind, then, we may say that a choice must be based on moral reasons and not on one's preferences if it is to meet the conditions for commitment.

Now that we have identified the *differentia specifica* of commitment to reside in the actor's reason for choosing, we can return to our question about the possibility or otherwise of a choice being simultaneously based on sympathy (when it is a welfare-increasing sympathetic choice) and on commitment? We established previously that all actions based on sympathy are egoistically motivated, for the agent who performs them does so from a motivation rooted in concerns about her own welfare. A committed choice, by contrast, is counter-preferential – it is not motivated by considerations of one's own welfare; as Peter and Schmid (2007, p. 4) aptly put it, commitment is 'motivationally unrelated to the agent's welfare, however broadly conceived'. If we understand commitment in this way, we splice choices based on sympathy from those based on commitment, and the set of choices which are both based on sympathy and commitment thereby becomes empty. Choices based on commitment are based on a moral reason which is independent of concerns the agent

has about her own welfare, whereby the moral reason suffices to motivate the choice in question; choices based on sympathy, on the other hand, are based on egoistic concerns, being, as they are, motivated by the agent's self-interest. With this, we avoid the dissonance of the conclusion that one and the same choice can be based on sympathy and on commitment.

## Conclusion

In this essay, I hope to have shown that sympathy is more complex than commentators believe, and I have argued for seven conclusions – (a) to (g) – which clarify sympathy. On account of its incorporation of non-welfare-maximising actions, sympathy cannot be straightforwardly accommodated by the orthodox theory of rational choice. To summarise the findings of this essay, I reproduce some of the conclusions in tabulated form to allow the reader to appreciate the internal variegation of sympathy as well as its distinctiveness from commitment.

**Table 1** Summary of findings

	<b>Contemplative sympathy</b>	<b>Active sympathy</b>	<b>Commitment</b>
<b>Affected by 'uncertainty'</b>	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Motivation</b>	Not applicable (because unrelated to action)	Egoistic (welfare-based)	Non-egoistic (reason-based)
<b>Expected-welfare consequences</b>	Not applicable	Welfare-increasing or welfare-maximizing	Indeterminate
<b>Relationship to altruism</b>	Not applicable	Compatible with self-interested altruism ('altruism through sympathy')	Compatible with 'psychological altruism'

## Endnotes

[1] Reprinted in Sen (1982, chapter 4), pp. 84-106. Page numbers in text refer to the reprint.

[2] The association of 'uncertainty' with situations in which numerical probabilities cannot be attached to possible outcomes is, of course, of utmost import to John Maynard Keynes, whose approach to uncertainty was developed in his *Treatise on Probability* (Part I) and applied to investment decisions in the *General Theory* (Chapter 12).

[3] Peter Ulrich (2008, p. 49) notes that *empathy* is, in contemporary parlance, probably a more appropriate term to describe the phenomenon which Smith denotes under the name of sympathy.

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